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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001116

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM VE
SUBJECT: WHEN CHAVISTAS ATTACK: OPPOSITION ACCUSATIONS/GOV
DENIALS

REF: CARACAS 00809

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor, for reasons 1.4
(B) and (D)

Summary

11. (C) The Coordinadora Democratica (CD) documented 210 assaults on opposition supporters by civilians or plainclothes security forces between February 27 and March 5. National Assembly Deputy Pedro Diaz Blum (Proyecto Venezuela) told poloff March 17 that National Guard troops allowed armed Chavistas to fire at opposition crowds during Caracas, Merida, and Valencia protests. Opposition and GOV leaders argued whether the murder of two opposition activists taken from a Caracas mini-bus was politically motivated or drug related. GOV leaders assert armed criminals or opposition provocateurs are responsible for protest deaths, not security forces or pro-GOV civilians. End Summary.

CD: 210 Attacks by Civilians/Plainclothes Police

12. (C) Coordinadora Democratica (CD) Judicial Advisor D'lsa Solorzano told poloff March 23 that the CD has documented 210 politically-motivated assaults on opposition supporters by groups in civilian cloths between February 27 and March 5. Determining how many of the attackers are civilians is difficult, Solorzano acknowledged, because the CD figures include plainclothes security forces and civilian groups mixed with off-duty and/or undercover security forces. Solorzano said the assailants could be armed fanatics of President Hugo Chavez (Chavistas), more organized pro-Chavez Bolivarian Circle members, pro-Chavez criminal gangs, GOV security forces in plainclothes, or any combination of the groups. Still, she asserted armed Chavista civilians were to blame for most of the cases.

Chavistas Attack/Kidnap Demonstrators February 27

13. (C) Solorzano claimed about 10 civilian Chavistas attacked her and other marchers on a side street after the National Guard broke up the February 27 march in Caracas. She said the group used National Guard issue rifles and tear gas bombs and were protected by a National Guard motorcyclists. One of her escorts was beaten and she received a minor blow to her leg. Solorzano claimed armed Chavistas attacked other marchers on side streets, while the National Guard clashed with the head of the march "where the media was focused." Seven protesters, now listed as missing, were forced into a van by civilians February 27, according to Solorzano.

14. (C) National Assembly Deputy Pedro Diaz Blum (Proyecto Venezuela) told poloff March 17 that National Guard troops in Valencia "didn't have to" fire at opposition protesters because armed civilians did it for them. Diaz Blum said relatives in Valencia saw armed Chavistas February 27 firing weapons at opposition crowds from behind National Guard troops, resulting in one death. Although he conceded determining the degree of Guard cooperation with armed civilians is difficult, Diaz Blum suspected civilians or off-duty soldiers provide National Guard commanders deniability for casualties and allow them to skip asking rank and file to fire on crowds. He claimed violent Chavista groups also used soldiers for cover and/or protection in Caracas and Merida. Chavista civilians are more organized, armed, and integrated with security forces since Chavez's brief ouster April 11, 2002, Diaz Blum asserted. He claimed a GOV source told him 200,000 Venezuelans have visited Cuba for political training that included civil defense courses, now being used to combat protesters.

Chavistas Responded to Merida Governor's Battle Cry

15. (C) Consular Agent Michele Lee told poloff March 24 that

Merida Governor Florencio Porras called on Chavistas "to take back the streets" March 3, after days of student-led protests. After nightfall, Chavista civilians responded and dispersed several small opposition protests by shooting into the air, at burning tires, at apartment buildings, and at a student government building, according to Lee and student leader Nixon Moreno (ref). Moreno brought testimony to poloff March 11 about the March 2 shooting of Argenis Dugarte, allegedly by the pro-Chavez student group Utopia. Dugarte died early on March 3.

16. (C) MVR Deputy Luis Velazquez told poloff March 24 that an alleged Chavista attack on a student government building in Merida March 3 "simply did not occur" and that investigators would expose it as an elaborate opposition hoax, despite CICPC comments that the shooters meant to kill. Velazquez refused to talk about details of this or any case, purportedly due to the ongoing nature of the investigations. He claimed armed opposition infiltrators were responsible for dead and injured protesters.

Mini-Bus Murders: Blaming the Victims

17. (C) Two of the deaths that occurred during the February 27 - March 4 confrontations blurred political/criminal lines. Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) activist Gustavo Farias told poloff March 19 that a pro-Chavez gang/political party called the Tupamaros killed two opposition leaders (Dictor Damas and Jose Luis Ricaurte Blanco) the night of March 3. Farias said a group of opposition leaders in the 23 of January barrio decided to cancel a protest after Tupamaros staked out the publicized location. Four of the leaders were later accosted in a mini-bus and taken to the El Calvario neighborhood by armed, masked civilians, where each was shot twice in the head, two fatally, according to Farias and press reports. He worked with the four men in the sports promotion office of Caracas Metropolitan Mayor Alfredo Pena.

18. (C) Farias said one of survivors (Hebert Eduardo Vela) was transferred to a hospital at an undisclosed private hospital in Miranda, with help of Miranda Governor Enrique Mendoza and Pena. Tupamaros allegedly cased the first hospital and have been spreading pamphlets with death threats for helping the survivors or implicating the group. Farias claimed the other survivor, Dimas Marcano, told him he was grazed by one bullet and another missed him entirely. Farias suspects Marcano, who abandoned the Tupamaros for the opposition six months ago, was either spared by his former colleagues or may be Tupamaro plant.

19. (C) Although National Investigative Police (CICPC) have kept Marcano's identity a secret, daily El Universal published a complete list of victims March 16, based on charges made by the Tupamaros that all four were drug dealers. Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel said that he would wait for the investigation to comment, but then noted he also had heard the victims were drug dealers. Mayor Pena defended his employees, and characterized the murder as politically motivated.

GOV Blames Armed Opposition Civilians

110. (U) At a meeting with diplomats March 16, Vice President Rangel implicitly denied GOV complicity with armed civilians. In addition, he said the National Guard can not be responsible for any shootings because they are not authorized to use "arms of war" in crowd control and, in any event, the bullets are the wrong caliber. (Note: opposition contacts reported security forces using non-standard weapons to conceal their involvement.) Rangel blamed the opposition for being "excessive" by using Molotov cocktails and firing on security forces, supposedly proven by numerous bullet marks on National Guard tanks.

Comment

111. (C) The GOV's denial of an armed pro-GOV civilian presence during the February 27 to March 5 protests contradicts video evidence of armed groups in civilian clothes walking the streets and attacking protesters. Post finds it much likelier that these groups are Chavistas than opposition agent provocateurs. Even if some were undercover security forces, they would still be illegally using "weapons of war."
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